

Transcript

Gender groups

EMILY FOSTER-HANSON:

Hi, I'm Emily Foster-Hanson, and this is a video abstract for my paper in developmental science, 'Stereotypes as prototypes in children's gender concepts', which I wrote with Marjorie Rhodes.

In this pre-registered study, 3- to 10-year-old children and adults picked which boys and girls they thought were the most representative and informative about their kinds or their category prototypes. Using these simplified scales of five category members that varied on a single stereotypical feature, like how much pink or blue they're wearing or how long or short their hair is, these were stereotypes that even the youngest kids in our sample were already familiar with.

So, for example, we measured which category member kids and adults thought was most representative of girls in general by asking which one they'd want to put in a book to teach someone else about the category. Participants completed the study online using unmoderated remote research. So they saw the questions as short videos, and then they answered by either clicking on a picture with the computer mouse or kids could point and have their parent click for them.

And we recorded kids' study sessions using their family's webcams. So here's a five-year-old participant completing the study and a recreation of what they saw.

INTERVIEWER:

Which girl should we put in our book to teach Feppy about girls?

CHILD:

This one.

INTERVIEWER 2:

This one, the one in the most pink?

CHILD:

Uh-huh.

EMILY FOSTER-HANSON:

We found that younger children, which as a reminder were as young as three years old, chose boys and girls with extreme stereotypical features, like the girl in head-to-toe pink, as more representative of their gender categories. And this tendency declined with age.

Here, children's age is continuous on the X-axis, and adults are included categorically, and the Y-axis is responses on the scale, with higher numbers meaning more stereotypically ideal choices like girls wearing more pink, boys with shorter hair, etc. Responses about boys are in the middle pane and responses about girls are on the right.

These patterns of developmental change were similar to the patterns in children's prototypes of animal categories, which we replicated from our previous work. This suggests that these findings reflect a feature of children's general conceptual structure, with young children focusing narrowly on their ideas of how category members are supposed to be, and gradually shifting across childhood towards prototypes that account more for the actual variability in what members of these categories are like.

We also measured prototypes indirectly by asking whether another unseen member of the category would share a novel property with the average or the most extreme stereotypical category member. Here's an example of what that looked like.

INTERVIEWER 1:

Now I have another question for you. This girl has something in her bones called a coracoid. This girl has something in her bones called an acromion. Now imagine there's another new girl. Do you think she has a coracoid in her bones like this girl or an acromion in her bones like this girl?

CHILD:

This one.

INTERVIEWER 2:

The one in the bright pink?

CHILD:

Uh-huh.

EMILY FOSTER-HANSON:

Here again, younger children were more likely to generalise from the extreme stereotypical category member than the average one. And this, again, shifted across childhood towards picking the average more often. This was, again, similar to the patterns in children's judgments about which members of animal categories are most informative, which we replicated from our past work.

We also found that, controlling for age, children whose parents reported more conservative socio-political views at the end of the study also held more extreme gender, but not animal, prototypes. Children learn about the social world largely from adults. And this result shows that children's social prototypes vary in line with their parents' socio-political views. But we'll need to do more research in the future to figure out exactly which aspects of children's cultural and social experiences can explain these effects.

So, to summarise, the study showed that stereotypes actually play a really central role in children's gender concepts, especially for younger children and for those growing up in more conservative families. More broadly, this research shows that young children's concepts narrowly focus on their ideas about how things are supposed to be, and that, across childhood, children gradually learn that animals and people, even if they fall into the same category, can actually be really different from each other. And this structure of children's concepts has consequences for how they learn and make judgments in their daily life.